DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 135 RC 021 281

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TITLE	Hamsters?! What Does 4-H Stand for, Anyway?
PUB DATE	1997-11-00
NOTE	8p.; In: Deeply Rooted, Branching Out, 1972-1997. Conference Proceedings: Annual AEE International Conference; see RC 021 269.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Achievement; *Adolescent Development; *Child Development; Educational Principles; *Experiential Learning; Models; Nonformal Education; Participation; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	Youth Participation; *4 H Clubs

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly traces the history of 4-H youth development programs, explains what youth development is, and shows how the experiential learning model is used in 4-H. Begun over 75 years ago as a means of extending the learning of the land-grant university to rural youth, 4-H is part of the Cooperative Extension Service. The curriculum includes research-based information put into a hands-on format and used by adults and older youth to teach life skills to other youth. The targeted audience includes all youth aged 5-19, their families, and other adult community members. As a youth development organization, 4-H helps boys and girls to build life skills and develop their capacities in positive ways. Sometimes classified as nonformal education, youth development is an organized, systematic approach that happens outside of regular school. Prominent characteristics are voluntary participation of youth and adults, organizational goals related to local agenda, recognition of achievement and growth, and experiential teaching of life skills. The 4-H experiential learning model includes five steps: experience the activity (do it), share the results, analyze and reflect on the experience, generalize to the real world, and apply what was learned to another situation. The healthy development of youth involves eight key components, which also enhance learning experiences. These components are physical and emotional safety, belonging and ownership, self-esteem, self-discovery, quality relationships with peers and adults, values formation and clarification, accomplishment and success, and capacity to enjoy life. (SV)

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Hamsters?! What Does 4-H Stand for, Anyway?

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ED 414 135

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ABSTRACT

Most people think about farms and county fairs when they hear "4-H." 4-H is much more . . . it's positive youth development and experiential learning in nonformal settings. This paper gives the history and background of 4-H Youth Development, explains what youth development is, and shows how the Experiential Learning Model is used in 4-H. Lastly, this paper identifies eight key components which are crucial for the healthy development of young people, and explains how these components can be used to build a successful youth development program.

History, Background, and Explanation of 4-H Youth Development

When people ask me "What do the four H's stand for?", sometimes, to elicit a smile, I start naming any "h" word that comes to mind: hamsters, haystacks, hula hoops, hamburgers, and so on. Many people don't know that 4-H is about leadership, technology, arts, and the environment. They don't know that kids can travel to Japan through 4-H, attend summer camp, go rock climbing, and build web pages. 4-H reaches the young and the old, and is found in cities, in the country, and in the suburbs.

So what is 4-H? 4-H is the oldest and largest publicly funded youth development organization in the United States, and exists in similar forms around the world. It started more than 75 years ago as a vehicle for extending the learning of the land-grant university to youth in rural communities. 4-H is part of the Cooperative Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture funded through federal, state, county, and private sources. The curriculum includes research-based university information put into a hands-

RC 021281

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on format which adults and older youth use in teaching life skills to other youth. 4-H is active in almost every county in the U.S.A. The targeted audience includes all school-age youth, 5–19 years old, their families, and adult members of the community. 4-H even exists at the collegiate level.

4-H started out as a crop-growing contest for youth. Since then the 4-H symbol has evolved into a four-leaf clover with each leaf representing one of the H's: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. Today's 4-H youth recite the pledge: "I pledge my Head to clearer thinking; my Heart to greater loyalty; my Hands to larger service; my Health to better living; for my club, my community, my country, and my world." As society has changed, 4-H has adjusted to meet the needs of kids in the '90s.

4-H is considered a youth development organization. The term "youth development" means the process of growing up and developing one's capacities in positive ways. It includes boys and girls of all ages building life skills and developing strengths, interests, and talents. Family, friends, and the community play an important role in youth development, socializing youth and providing experiences, challenges, and support. Youth development is different from academic studies, yet is necessary for helping young people to grow into productive adults. Sometimes classified as "non-formal education," youth development is an organized, systematic approach that happens outside of regular school. It can take place in kitchens, churches, gymnasiums, meeting halls, county fair grounds, scouting groups, 4-H clubs, and any place that youth and adults can come together and learn (Walker & Dunham, 1994).

Youth development organizations include several prominent characteristics. Youth and adult participation is voluntary, and the organization's values reflect the core values of the group. A youth development organization is allowed to identify its own goals and can respond to local agendas. The

organization might be structured as a club setting, camp, creative or expressive art form, sport, group meeting, or event. Achievement and growth are usually recognized through badges, ribbons, trophies, certificates, and expanded leadership or performance opportunities. Youth development organizations teach life skills through experiential education using a teacher/learner partnership (Walker & Dunham, 1994).

The Experiential Learning Model is used in 4-H Youth Development programs. An example of this is on page 5 of the 4-H publication, *Dog Group Activity Guide.* The publication states that "hands-on involvement is the most effective method of 4-H project work." "Learning by doing" is one of the main reasons 4-H has been so widely recognized and respected in the field of nonformal education. The activity guide quotes John Dewey: "Experiential learning takes place when a person is involved in an activity, looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity."

The model shown in the *Dog Group Activity Guide* is a circular flow chart with the five steps in the Experiential Learning Model. The process is as follows: First, *experience* the activity. Perform it or do it. Youth have a hands-on experience. Second, *share* the results, reactions, and observations. Youth describe results of the experience and their reactions. Third, *process* by looking at the experience; analyze and reflect. Youth relate the experience to a targeted life skill. Fourth, *generalize* to connect the experience to real-world examples. Youth connect the life skill to the larger world. Lastly, *apply* what was learned to a similar or different situation; practice. Youth use the new life skill in other parts of their lives. The model is summed up by a three-step triangle: Do, Reflect, and Apply.

The activities outlined in the *Dog Group Activity Guide* provide ideas about how to involve youth in ways that help them develop life skills. At the same time, youth are learning about some aspect of dogs, whether it's obedience training, reproduction and genetics; grooming, nutrition, careers, or animal welfare.

The 4-H dog project is just one example of subject matter taught through experiences in 4-H. Pittman (1991) has identified five basic competencies which youth need in order to grow into successful adults. These competencies include: Health and Physical; Personal and Social; Cognitive and Creative; Vocational; and Citizenship. These areas are all covered by 4-H Youth Development programs, and also by most formal academic schools. The difference between formal and non-formal education comes in the design and delivery method. The three fundamental principles which guide 4-H reinforce the belief that: youth participation is essential, experiential methods are preferred, and caring adults are essential to program success. In these ways, 4-H covers a broad range of topics and activities which involve both rural and urban youth in the learning process (Walker & Dunham, 1994).

Keys to Quality Youth Development

Konopka (1973) and Pittman (1991) have identified important components crucial for healthy youth development. The University of Minnesota Center for 4-H Youth Development has designed a working tool, a 20-page publication called *Keys to Quality Youth Development*, in order to stimulate, challenge, and encourage youth and adults to work together to plan, conduct, and evaluate quality experiences. *Keys to Quality Youth Development* explains each of the eight key components important in the healthy development of young people. Learning experiences are more powerful when tied to one or more of the eight identified keys.

The keys are that youth feel safe, experience belonging and ownership, develop self-worth, discover themselves, develop quality relationships with peers and adults, discuss conflicting values and form their own, feel the pride and accomplishment that comes with mastery, and expand their capacity to enjoy life and know that success is possible. The discussion of each key includes a premise, a foundation, outcomes, practices, examples, tools, tips, insights, and questions for youth. A brief summary of the eight components follows.

Youth learn better and take part in a program when they feel physically and emotionally safe. One way to create such an environment is to allow youth to have a voice in choosing the location for the activity or event, and to let the group set the expectations for participation. This kind of setting encourages trust, honesty, and respect between youth and adults.

When youth can experience belonging and ownership, they will feel included and motivated. Youth should be involved in the planning, allowing plenty of time for discussion, questions, and decision making. Youth should have significant roles as participants and leaders.

Youth develop self-worth through meaningful contribution. They should have a choice in what they want to do, and what they want to learn. The five steps in the Experiential Learning Model should be used in the process. Involving youth in important roles and responsibilities will allow them to feel accepted, acknowledged, and appreciated.

Youth should be encouraged to try new things and learn about themselves. Experiences should relate to real-life situations, with plenty of time to share their stories. Teaming youth up with mentors is helpful, as is role-playing and community service projects. As a result, youth discover and

practice their interests and skills, test their independence, and take control of their lives.

Developing quality relationships with caring and trusting adults is another key to the healthy development of young people. In a new situation, ice breakers and get-acquainted activities are helpful for getting on a first-name basis. Adults and youth should be encouraged to learn and participate as teams. This kind of interaction encourages respect and communication between both generations.

Youth need a safe place to talk with their peers and other adults about values and topics that are important to them. Ground rules may need to be set to assure a respectful environment, and people involved need to listen to each other. All beliefs and questions should be taken seriously so youth are able to get information, understand others' views, and build their own set of personal values.

Youth experience success by completing activities appropriate for their stage of development and preferred style of learning. Youth should set goals, both as individuals and as groups, and be able to achieve them. Action plans can be developed, with structured time for feedback. Youth should feel the pride and accountability that comes with mastery.

Lastly, youth should expand their capacity to enjoy life and know that success is possible. One way to do this is to provide informal interaction with peers, and to plan activities that offer fun and adventure. Youth learn and grow from successes and failures.

These are eight important elements in healthy youth development. Learning and growth is enhanced by including one or more of the above keys in a program or activity. 4-H Youth Development uses these techniques and

practices to build successful programs, and these same ideas can be effectively applied to all youth development programs with positive results.

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